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Free Choice

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THE EXISTENCE OF FREE CHOICE: DEFINED CHURCH TEACHING

A central truth of divine revelation is that human persons, created in the image and likeness of God, have the power of free choice. In order to create beings to whom he could give his very own life, God created persons (angelic and human) who have the power to make or break their own lives by their own free choices. Persons are of themselves, *sui iuris*, i.e., in their own power or dominion. Their choices and actions are their own, not the choices and actions of others. If the Triune God's offer of his own life and friendship is to be a *gift*, it must be freely received; it cannot be forced on others or settled by anything other than the free choice of the God who freely gives himself and the free choices of created persons who freely accept this gift.

The truth that human persons have the capacity to determine themselves and their lives through their own free choices is integral to Catholic faith. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* declares:

God created man a rational being, conferring on him the dignity of a person who can initiate and control his own actions. "God willed that man should be 'left in the hand of his own counsel' (see Sir 15:14), so that he might of his own accord seek his Creator and freely attain his full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him" (no. 1730; the internal citation is from Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* [*Gaudium et spes*], 17).

The power of free choice, which Vatican Council II hailed as "an exceptional sign of the divine image within man" (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 17), is clearly affirmed by Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, and the whole Catholic tradition. In a beautiful passage cited by Pope John

Paul II in his Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, the great Greek Father, St. Gregory of Nyssa, eloquently described human freedom of choice as our power to "create ourselves," as it were:

All things subject to change and to becoming never remain constant, but continually pass from one state to another, for

better or worse...Now human life is always subject to change; it needs to be born ever anew...But here birth does not come about by a foreign intervention, as is the case with bodily beings...; it is the result of a free choice. Thus we *are*, in a certain way, our own parents, creating ourselves as we will, by our decisions.¹

Like St. Gregory of Nyssa, Pope John Paul II emphasizes the *self-determining* character of free choice. Thus he writes that "freedom is not only the choice for one or another particular action; it is also, within that choice, a *decision about oneself* and a setting of one's own life for or against the Good, for or against the truth, and ultimately, for or against God" (*Veritatis splendor*, 65).

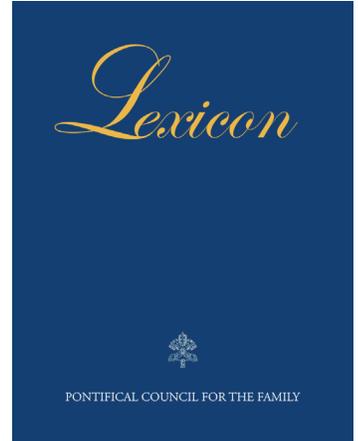
Indeed, the great truth that human persons are free to choose what they are to do and, in and through those choices, to make themselves *to be* the kind of persons they are was solemnly defined by the Council of Trent.²

WHAT FREE CHOICE IS

Free choice makes morality possible and renders us responsible for our actions and our lives (see *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1734). It is, as Germain Grisez so rightly emphasizes, the *existential* principle or source of morality. It is the existential principle of moral good and

1 St. Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis*, II, 2-3; cited in *Veritatis splendor*, 71.

2 Cf. H. DENZINGER and A. SCHÖNMETZGER, *Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum* (35th ed.: Rome: Herder, 1975), 1555.



moral evil because moral good and moral evil depend for their being on the power of free choice. This is so because what we do is *our* doing only if we freely choose to do what we do, and it can be *evil* doing or its opposite only if we freely choose to do it.³

Free choice is experienced when one is aware of a conflict. Different possible alternatives of action are present to one, but they cannot all be realized simultaneously. One deliberates about these possibilities, but deliberation cannot settle the matter. Deliberation cannot determine which of the alternatives promises unambiguously the greater good; it cannot do so precisely because each alternative, to be eligible as a possibility of choice, must promise participation in some good that is simply incommensurable with the good promised by other alternatives. It is for this reason, as will be shown below, why the proportionalist method of making moral judgments is utterly unworkable. Proportionalism claims that one ought to choose the greater good or lesser evil, but this presupposes that we can *know*, prior to choice, which alternatives promise the greater good or lesser evil. But if we could know this then there would be no reason to choose the lesser good or greater evil; to do so would be irrational, and immoral actions, although unreasonable, are not irrational. I will return to this later.

The experience of free choice can be summarized as follows: First, a person is in a situation where he or she is attracted by alternative possibilities and there is no way to eliminate the incompatibility of the different alternatives or to limit the possibilities to one only. A person is free to do this or to do that, but not both; they are real, i.e., eligible but incompatible and incommensurable possibilities. Second, the person realizes that it is up to him or her to settle the matter and determine which possibility is realized. Third, the person is aware of making the choice and aware of nothing that “makes” him or her make it. In other words, one is aware that one is free to settle the matter and to freely choose one option among the alternative possibilities.

FREE CHOICE, HUMAN ACTION, AND A PERSON’S MORAL BEING

Free choices bear upon actions that we can do. But the actions in question are not simply physical events in

3 Cf. G. GRISEZ, *The Way of the Lord Jesus, 1:Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), 41. See also St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1, q. 83, a. 1; 1-2, q. 1, a. 1; 1-2, q. 6, a. 1; 1-2, q. 18, a. 1. See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1732.

the material world that come and go, like the falling of rain or the turning of the leaves. The actions at stake are not things that merely “happen” to a person. They are, rather, the outward expression of a person’s choice, the disclosure or revelation of that person’s moral identity, his or her being as a moral being. For at the core of an action, as human and personal, is a free, self-determining choice, which as such is something spiritual and abides within the person, determining the very being of the person. The Scriptures, particularly the New Testament, are very clear about this. Jesus taught that it is not what enters a person that defiles him or her; rather, it is what flows from the person, from his or her heart, from his or her choice (see Matt 15:10-20; Mk 7:14-23). We can say that a human action—i.e., a free, intelligible action, whether good or bad—is the adoption by choice of some intelligible proposal and the execution of this choice through some exterior performance. But the core of the action is the free, self-determining choice that abides in the person, making him or her *to be* the kind of person he or she is. Thus, I become an adulterer, as Jesus clearly taught (Matt 5:28), when I look at a woman with lust, i.e., when I adopt by choice the proposal to commit adultery with her or to think with satisfaction about doing so, even if I am prevented from executing this choice externally. The execution of the choice to commit adultery increases the malice of my act, but even if the choice is not for some reason executed, I have still, by my own free choice, made myself *to be* an adulterer.

This illustrates the *self-determining* character of free choice. It is in and through the actions we freely choose to do that we give to ourselves our identity as moral beings, for weal or for woe. This identity abides in us until we make other, contradictory kinds of choices. Thus, if I choose to commit adultery, I make myself *to be* an adulterer, and I remain an adulterer, internally disposed to commit adultery, until, by another free and self-determining choice, I have a change of heart (*metanoia*) and repent of my deed. I am then a *repentant adulterer*, one determined, through free choice and with the help of God’s never-failing grace, to amend my life and *to be* a faithful, loving spouse.

The significance of freely chosen human acts as self-determining is beautifully brought out by Pope John Paul II. After noting that “it is precisely through his acts that man attains perfection as man,” he goes on to say: “Human acts are moral acts because they express and determine the goodness or evil of the individual who performs them. They do not produce a change merely in the states of affairs outside of man, but, *to the extent that they are delib-*

erate choices, they give moral definition to the very person who performs them, determining his *profound spiritual traits*" (*Veritatis Splendor*, 71).

We might say that freely chosen acts are like "words" that we speak and through which we give to ourselves our moral character, our identity as moral beings.⁴ Indeed, *character* or our identity as moral beings, can be properly identified as "the integral existential identity of the person—the entire person in all his or her dimensions as shaped by morally good and bad choices—considered as a disposition to further choices."⁵

SMALL CHOICES, LARGE CHOICES, COMMITMENTS AND "FUNDAMENTAL OPTION THEORY"

All of our free choices are self-determining. But some choices we can call "small" choices whereas others can be termed "large" choices or commitments. "Small" choices determine one or another aspect of our being, whereas "large" choices determine us more profoundly, and some—fundamental commitments or "options"—shape our entire moral existence.

A "small" choice can be illustrated thus. I choose to drink my coffee black, i.e., without any additives. In choosing to do so I make myself *to be* a drinker of black coffee and I remain such until I freely choose to add cream or sugar or both to my coffee. I may also choose to tell "small lies" to my wife in order to avoid unpleasant consequences, i.e., that I have indeed mailed a letter she had given me to post even though I forgot to do so and intend to mail it as soon as possible. In choosing to tell this "small lie" I make myself *to be* a liar, disposed to lie in similar circumstances in the future. Telling a "small lie" (light matter and therefore only venially sinful) is an instance of a "small" choice. Choosing to perjure myself, i.e., to lie under oath in a court of law, on the other hand, is a "large" choice because here the "matter" of the lie is gravely serious and in choosing to lie in this way I make myself *to be* a perjurer, one disposed to lie regarding gravely serious matters under similar conditions.

Among large choices are those we can call "commitments". Pope John Paul II, in his criticism of certain kinds of fundamental option theories in *Veritatis splendor*,

4 On this, cf. the illuminating treatment of human action as language in Herbert McCabe, O.P., *What Is Ethics All About?* (Washington, D.C.: Corpus Books, 1969), 90-94.

5 G. GRISEZ, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, 1: *Christian Moral Principles*, 59.

noted that it is correct to emphasize "the importance of certain choices which 'shape' a person's entire moral life, and which serve as bounds within which other particular everyday choices can be situated and allowed to develop" (n. 65). Here he recognizes the crucial moral importance of certain kinds of choices that can properly be called fundamental "commitments" or "options".

The choice to marry, or to become a priest or religious or a member of the Mafia illustrates this. When a man and a woman marry by freely choosing to give themselves irrevocably to one another in an intimate partnership of life and love (see *Gaudium et spes*, 48), they commit themselves through this choice to a way of life—married life—and it is their moral obligation to integrate other free choices into this commitment, and likewise their duty not to make choices incompatible with this fundamental commitment. They have committed themselves to a life of utter fidelity to one another, to a readiness "to welcome life lovingly, nurture it humanely, and educate it religiously," i.e., in the love and service of God and neighbor,⁶ and to life together "for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, until death do they part."

Pope John Paul II, in this section of *Veritatis splendor*, goes on to teach that the "choice of freedom" which Christian moral teaching, even in its Biblical roots, acknowledges as fundamental is "the decision of faith, of the *obedience of faith*" (cf. Rom 16:26). This is the free choice, he then continues, citing a passage from Vatican Council II (which in turn cites a passage from Vatican I),⁷ by which man makes a total and free self-commitment to God, offering 'the full submission of intellect and will to God as he reveals'. The pope continues by saying that since faith is a commitment to God that is to bear fruit in works (cf. Matt 12:33-35; Lk 6:43-45; Rom 8:5-10; Gal 5:22), it demands that one keep the commandments of the Decalogue and follow Jesus even to the point of losing his life for Jesus' sake and the sake of the Gospel (cf. Mk 8:35) (no. 66).

From this we can see that the *fundamental option* of a Christian is his/her baptismal commitment. This is a specific free choice whereby a Christian freely commits himself/herself to a life of union with Jesus. In and through this choice—this act of faithful obedience—a Christian freely chooses to share in Christ's redemptive work and to complete, in his/her own flesh, "what is lacking in Christ's af-

6 On this, cf. ST. AUGUSTINE, *De genesi ad literam*, 2-9.

7 VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Dei Verbum*, 5; the internal citation is from Vatican Council I, *Dei Filius*, 3: DS 1569.

flections for the sake of his body, that is, the Church” (Col 1:24). In and through baptism Jesus pours into our hearts His very own life and love, and by freely choosing to accept this divine gift, bequeathed us by virtue of Jesus’ saving death and resurrection, we in turn commit ourselves to cooperating with our Redeemer in His saving mission so that “we all attain to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13) until Jesus “will change our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power which enables Him even to subject all things to Himself” (Phil 3:21).⁸ Because this is the Christian’s fundamental choice or option, the one that “shapes” the Christian’s entire life and serves “as the bounds within which other particular everyday choices can be situated and allowed to develop” (*Veritatis splendor*, 65), the Christian must seek to *integrate all his daily choices* into this fundamental commitment. Certain choices—mortal sins—are utterly incompatible with this commitment, whereas others—venial sins—while in some way compatible with it are not fully compatible with it. The Christian grows in holiness and becomes a saint—the vocation to which he/she is called—precisely by growing in integrating every choice of every day into this overarching commitment.

Note that John Paul II identifies the “fundamental option” or commitment of the Christian with a *specific act of free choice*, with a *specific act of self-determination*. He rejects, and rightly so, those theories of “fundamental option” which sharply distinguish between the “free choices” that we make every day and a ‘fundamental freedom’, deeper than and different from freedom of choice...whereby the person makes an overall self-determination”...leading to a distinction “*between the fundamental option and deliberate choices of a concrete kind of behavior*” (*Veritatis splendor*, 65). Those who propose a fundamental option theory of this kind in effect tear asunder the relationship between the person and his acts and relocate self-determination from *free choice* to an alleged “fundamental” or “transcendental freedom,” deeper than free choice. This theory, which denies the *self-determining* character of free choice,⁹ is rightly repudiated

8 On this cf. GRISEZ, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, 1: *Christian Moral Principles*, 551-554; W.E. MAY, *An Introduction to Moral Theology* (rev. ed.: Huntington, 1994, 196-202; cf also George T. Montague, S.M., *Maturing in Christ: St. Paul’s Program for Christian Growth* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1964), pp. 193-230.

9 One of the best critiques of the flawed fundamental option theory is given by Joseph Boyle, “Freedom, the Human Person, and Human Action,” in *Principles of Catholic Moral Life*, ed. William E. May, Chicago 1981, 237-266.

by Pope John Paul II.

FREE CHOICES: INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL

Some choices can only be made by two or more people. Marriage is a paradigmatic example. Both the man and the woman must choose to give themselves to one another and to receive one another as spouses. Neither’s choice to marry is effective without the other’s. Marriage, in short, comes into being only through the irrevocable personal consent of both the man and the woman (see *Gaudium et spes*, 48).

Human persons are naturally inclined to live in society; they need one another to exist and find fulfillment. Among the reasons for this need is the fact that every choice entails self-limitation as well as self-fulfillment. Some possibilities must be set aside if one is to pursue others. One accepts limitations because one realizes that one cannot do and be everything. But genuine community can make up for this limitation. In a true community one becomes united to others in friendship and harmony and is therefore capable of being fulfilled in others in ways in which one can never be fulfilled in oneself. Thus family members rejoice when one of them does something well, players on a team applaud the accomplishments of someone who does what they could not do themselves, etc. A true community is one body with many members (see 1 Cor 12:12-13:13).¹⁰

Moreover, in any community certain persons can make choices on behalf of the community as a whole. If the persons who do so act within the limits of the authority vested in them, their choices involve every member of the community. Although individual members of the community may resist decisions made by those exercising authority within the community, their resistance to a legitimate authoritative decision of the community alienates them, in whole or in part, from that community. Thus dissent from the authoritative teachings of the Magisterium harms the unity of the Church and alienates dissenters, at least in part, from the ecclesial community (see *Veritatis splendor*, 26). As one contemporary scholar correctly observes

The social [communal] dimension of choice is very important in moral theology. The story of salvation begins with the promise to Abraham that all nations will find salvation through him, and this promise is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus (see Gn 12:1-3; Acts 3:25; Rom 4:13; Gal 3:8,16). It is by social choices that the

10 Cf. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 96, a. 4; I-II, q. 94, a. 2; II-II, q. 129, a. 6, ad 1.

relationship between God, the Lord Jesus as man, the Church, and the individual Christian is established and lived. Furthermore, one cannot understand original sin without bearing in mind that in any community someone can and does make the choice which is decisive for the social choice and responsibility of the whole community.¹¹

Because some choices are communal, *social sin* is a reality. The sinful choices of individuals, when tolerated and then accepted by the society in which they live, become the practices of the society. They become embedded in the culture and in the laws and mores of a society, its way of life, its way of mediating meaning to people. Thus today in Western societies a “contraceptive mindset” has developed so that many individuals spontaneously regard it as the “natural” thing to do in order to cope with serious problems and have difficulty in even considering that contraception could be immoral. It is in this way that a “culture of death” can develop and indeed has developed. Pope John Paul II clearly recognized the reality of “social sin” in his Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et penitentia*. But he rightly emphasized that all social sin is, ultimately, rooted in the sinful choices of particular persons: “the real responsibility [...] lies with individuals” (n. 16).

FREE CHOICE, TRUTH, AND THE MORALITY OF HUMAN CHOICES AND ACTS

We are free to choose what we are to do and in this way determine ourselves *to be* the persons we are. But we are *not* free to make what we choose to do to be morally good or morally bad. We know this from our own experience, for we know that at times we have freely chosen to do things that we knew, at the very moment we chose to do them, were *morally bad*. We can, in short, choose badly or well. This means that our choices need to be guided by the *truth*, and it likewise means that we can come to know the truth *prior* to choice. There is, in short, an intimate bond between *freedom* and the *truth* or between free choice and the moral “law.” There can be no genuine conflict between free choice and the moral law because, as John Paul II has beautifully shown, the moral “law,” which has God as its author, is *not* a set of arbitrary decrees legalistically imposed upon us in order to restrict our

11 GRISEZ, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, 1: *Christian Moral Principles*, 53. On the idea of a “corporate personality,” so central to the Biblical understanding of human community, cf. E. BEST, *One Body in Christ: A Study in the Relationship of the Church to Christ in the Epistles of the Apostle Paul*, S.P.C.K., London 1955, 184-207; J. DE FRAINE, *Adam and the Family of Man*, Alba House, Staten Island, N.Y. 1965.

freedom to do as we please, but is rather God’s wise and loving plan for human existence and happiness.¹² Rather, this “law” consists of *truths* meant to help human persons make true moral judgments and good moral choices and in this way truly fulfill themselves and, as Vatican Council II and John Paul II affirm, achieve the dignity of persons who, freed from subservience to feelings and in a free choice of the good, pursue their own true end (cf. *Veritatis splendor*, 42; *Gaudium et spes*, 17).

I cannot here consider in detail the moral law or “truths” needed to guide free choices. But it is possible to provide a brief account of this critically important matter and to show why the “truth” proposed by proportionalists/consequentialists to guide choices is utterly spurious.

The greatest moral truth is that we are to love God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves, a truth central to the Old Testament (Dt 6:5; Lv 19:18). Indeed, when Jesus was asked, “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the law?” He replied: “You shall Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets” (Matt 22:36-40; cf. Mk 12:28-31; Lk 10:25-28; Rom 13:10; Gal 5:14).

Moreover, as Pope John Paul II insists, the precepts of the second tablet of the Decalogue, those concerned with our neighbors, while expressed negatively, are rooted in the commandment that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, a commandment expressing “the singular dignity of the human person, ‘the only creature that God has wanted for its own sake’” (*Veritatis splendor*, 13; the internal citation is from *Gaudium et spes*, 24). In addition, as the Holy Father then rightly notes, we can love our neighbor and respect his inviolable dignity as a person only by cherishing the real goods perfective of him and by refusing to damage, destroy, or impede these goods. Appealing to the words of Jesus, Pope John Paul II emphasizes the truth that “the different commandments of the Decalogue are really only so many reflections on the one commandment about the good of the person, at the level of the many different goods which characterize his identity as a spiritual and bodily being in relationship with God, with his neighbor, and with the material world [...] The commandments of which Jesus reminds the [rich]

12 Cf. VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Dignitatis humanae*, 3: “the highest norm of human life is God’s divine law—eternal, objective, and universal—whereby God orders, directs, and governs the entire universe and all the ways of the human community according to a *plan conceived in his wisdom and love*” (emphasis added).

young man are meant to safeguard the *good* of the person, the image of God, by protecting his *goods*,” goods such as human life itself, the communion of persons in marriage, etc. (n. 13).

Here the Holy Father is articulating once more the whole Catholic moral tradition. Centuries ago, St. Thomas Aquinas emphasized that “God is offended by us only because we act contrary to our own good.”¹³ God wills that the goods constitutive of human well-being flourish in us: goods such as life itself, health and bodily integrity, knowledge of the truth and appreciation of beauty, fellowship and harmony with other human persons, etc.¹⁴

Human actions, moreover, are specified morally by the “*object*” freely chosen. In *Veritatis splendor* Pope John Paul II emphasizes this truth, rooted in the Catholic tradition especially as articulated by Thomas Aquinas, declaring: “*the morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the ‘object’ rationally chosen by the deliberate will*” (n. 78; emphasis in the original). Then, in a passage that not only summarizes the Catholic tradition but also bears witness to the truth that a human act is no mere physical happening but rather a reality flowing from the inner core of the person insofar as it is *freely chosen*, John Paul II goes on to say:

In order to be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies that act morally, it is therefore necessary to place oneself *in the perspective of the acting person*. The object of an act of willing is in fact a freely chosen kind of behavior. To the extent that it is in conformity with the order of reason, it is the cause of the goodness of the will; it perfects us morally [...] By the object of a given moral act, then, one cannot mean a process or an event of the merely physical order, to be assessed on the basis of its ability to bring about a given state of affairs in the outside world. Rather that object is the proximate end of a deliberate decision [=free choice] which determines the act of willing on the part of the acting person (n. 78).¹⁵

In short, the “*object*” of the moral act is precisely what one freely chooses to do here and now and, in doing so, ratifies in his heart and endorses. With this understanding of the “*object*” of a human act in mind, it is easy to

13 ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa contra Gentiles*, III, q. 122.

14 On this cf. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2; GRISEZ, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, 1: *Christian Moral Principles*, 115-140.

15 Cf. also ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 18; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1751.

grasp the truth of what the Pope then says: “Reason attests that there are objects of the human act which are by their nature ‘incapable of being ordered’ to God because they radically contradict the good of the person made in his image. These are the acts which, in the Church’s moral tradition, have been termed ‘intrinsically evil’ (*intrinsece malum*): they are such *always and per se*, in other words, on account of their very object, and quite apart from the ulterior intentions of the one acting and the circumstances” (n. 80). In other words, a human person cannot freely choose to *kill* an innocent person, intentionally to deprive that person of the *good of innocent human life*, without *willing evil* and making himself/herself *to be a killer*. One might choose to do so for some good *ulterior* end, e.g., to prevent the deaths of other innocent human beings, but human persons, made in the image of God, are not to *will that evil be*, just as the God whose image they are is absolutely innocent of evil. They can, like God himself, *permit* or *allow* evil to occur under certain conditions, but in order to exercise their free choices rightly, to conform their choices to the *truth*, they ought never *intend that evil be*, i.e., to freely choose a moral act specified by an “*object*” whose willing violates the good of the person made in God’s image by violating one or another of his “*goods*,” goods such as bodily life itself, the marital communion, etc.

Proportionalists deny this truth. They contend that a human person can rightly *intend* or *choose evil*, such as the death of an innocent human being, *for the sake of a greater proportionate good or lesser evil*.¹⁶ They come to this conclusion because they claim that the basic normative principle enabling us to distinguish between morally good and morally bad possibilities of choice, is that one ought to choose the alternative promising the greater good or the lesser evil. John Paul II accurately describes this claim when he says that proportionalism, “by weighing the various values and goods being sought, focuses on the proportion acknowledged between the good and bad effects of [one’s] choice, with a view to the ‘greater good’ or ‘lesser evil’ actually possible in a given situation” (*Veritatis splendor*, 75). In repudiating this way of making moral judgments to guide free choices, which he judges unfaithful to the Catholic tradition, the Holy Father observes that “everyone recognizes the difficulty, or rather

16 Theologians advocating this view include L. Janssens, J. Fuchs, S.J., R. McCormick, S.J., and many others. Cf., for instance, L. JANSSENS, “Ontic Evil and Moral Evil,” *Louvain Studies* 4(1972), 115-156; J. FUCHS, “The Absoluteness of Moral Terms,” *Gregorianum* 52(1971), 415-458; R. MCCORMICK, *Ambiguity in Moral Choice: Péré Marquette Lecture in Theology*, Marquette University Press, Milwaukee 1973.

the impossibility, of evaluating all the good and evil consequences and effects—defined as pre-moral—of one’s own acts: an exhaustive calculation is not possible” (n. 77).

I would like now to show why the claim of the proportionalists is utterly unworkable and incompatible with the reality of free choice. Earlier in this essay I emphasized that free choice is possible only when there are eligible or choosable alternatives. And there are such alternatives *only* when the different alternatives of choice promise participation in some *good* not commensurable with the good promised by other alternatives. For example, if one is thinking of buying a house and wants a house (a) within a certain price category, (b) with four bedrooms and a family room, (c) within walking distance of church and elementary school, and (d) proximate to public transportation, and if one house out of four available promises *all* these benefits (a,b,c,d) whereas none of the others do, then no choice is possible or needed as long as one is still willing to buy a house fulfilling these conditions. Of the alternatives available only one has all the benefits one is seeking; hence the appeal (the eligibility) of the other houses disappears. They are no longer eligible or choosable because they promise no good not present in the house that has all the benefits one is seeking. But if none of the houses available has all the benefits one wants, then one must make a choice among them if one wishes to buy a house, and ultimately the matter is settled either by choosing one or by choosing not to buy a house now and to postpone such a purchase.

But proportionalism as a way of making moral judgments requires that two conditions be met, and the two conditions are incompatible. The conditions are: (1) that a moral judgment is to be made, which means both that a choice must be made and that a morally wrong option could be chosen after the judgment is made, and (2) that a judgment identifying the alternative promising the greater good or lesser evil can be made prior to choice and that the morally obligatory option is the one promising the greater good or lesser evil. But these two conditions cannot be met simultaneously.

If condition (1) is met and the morally bad option *could be chosen*, its morally acceptable alternative must be known, for otherwise one could not choose wrongly, for one can do so only when one knows which option one *ought* to choose but nonetheless chooses another. But if condition (2) is met, then condition (1) cannot be. It cannot be because if a person knew, *prior to choice* (as condition [2] requires), which option promises the definitely superior proportion of good to evil (or the less-

er evil), then its inferior alternatives simply could not be chosen—there would be no *reason* to choose them. If a person *knows*, prior to choice, the alternative promising the “greater good” or “lesser evil,” then other alternatives (those allegedly not morally acceptable) would simply fade away and one could not choose them.¹⁷

Moreover, proportionalists fail to take seriously the truth that we determine *ourselves* by our free choices. They do not recognize the *reflexive character* of human free choice. For they claim that it is morally permissible to *choose evil* for the sake of securing a greater good or avoiding a greater evil. For them, we can *will that evil be*. As John Paul II says, they “do not take into sufficient consideration the fact that the will is involved in the concrete choices which it makes” (*Veritatis splendor*, no. 75). Their interest, as several outstanding theologians have rightly noted,¹⁸ focuses on the external states of affairs in the outside world that our actions bring about. Their focus is on what our actions *get done* in the external world, and they want the moral agent to choose those options judged most effective means for bringing this state of affairs about.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, human actions are of critical moral significance not because of what they get done in the outside world, but because of what they have to reveal or say about *ourselves*. For at the core of a human, moral act is a free, self-determining choice whereby we *give to ourselves our identity as moral beings*. And, as living images of the God who calls us to holiness, we ought not freely choose to do evil and thus to make ourselves *to be evildoers*. As we have seen, it is what flows from a person, from his or her heart, from the core of his or her being, from his or her *free choice* that defiles him/her or, on the contrary, identifies him or her as a human person whose *will* is to do what is pleasing to the Father, to love and respect the *good* of the human persons made in God’s image and in this way honor their inviolable dignity.

17 On this, cf. GRISEZ, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, 1: *Christian Moral Principles*, 152-153.

18 For example. cf. J. FINNIS, *Moral Absolutes: Tradition, Revision, and the Truth* Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991, especially 20-24, 93-100; M. RHONHEIMER, “Intentional Actions and the Meaning of Object: A Reply to Richard McCormick,” in J.A. DINOIA – R. CESSARIO, (eds.), *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, Midwest Theological Forum, Chicago 1999, 241-270, especially 245-250.